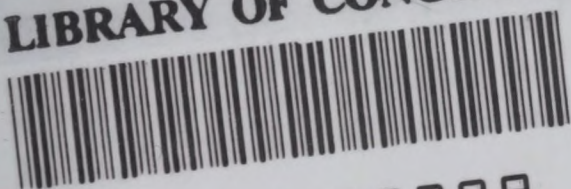
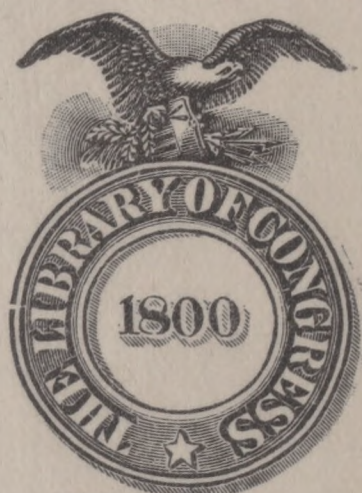


HELEN'S CHOICE

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Helen's Choice

A Tale of Long Island.

BY

METTA HORTON COOK,

Author of "Yennycott Folks."

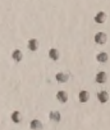
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J. S. OGILVIE PUBLISHING COMPANY.

NEW YORK:
J. S. OGILVIE PUBLISHING CO.,
57 ROSE STREET.

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INTRODUCTION

The facts of this story were told me one summer morning by a lovable old woman. She lived in a little unpainted house on a country road, where I stopped to get a drink from the old-fashioned well. I was invited into her sitting-room, fragrant with honeysuckle from the vine-shaded, open windows. It was a restful room in appearance; the home-made rag-carpet of well-blended colors, a little mahogany

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table in the middle of the floor with a glass of roses in the center, books and papers strewn over its rounded leaves; the hair-cloth sofa, long and wide, held inviting pillows of home-wrought design; old-style chairs seemed so persuasive with old-time hospitality, I could not resist the inclination to stop a while, and, too, from the wall, portraits of kindly faces smiled a welcome only outvied by the genial countenance of my hostess.

“Please tell me about her,” I urged, seating myself opposite the most attractive picture and look-

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ing at it with fixed attention. It was a heart-affecting face of one in life-long perplexity. The eyes were full of soft tenderness, lips of child-like affection, and an expression of refinement pervaded every feature.

“That’s my grandmother,” she replied.

“Do tell me about her,” I pleaded.

In quaint phrases and simple words of inimitable eloquence, she told me incidents of that life whose image to the mind one could not easily lose.

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I

HAPPENINGS

More than a hundred years ago, Jennie Mott was a belle in fashionable society of "Olde New York."

Among her admirers was Captain Vogel, a large man with heavy features, his square-set chin adding to the determined look of his face, which showed he would brook no thwarting of wish or plan.

At their summer home on Long

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Island, the Mott family while lingering at the breakfast table heard a carriage come round the driveway and stop at the front door.

"It's Captain Vogel," said Mr. Mott, rising to greet him at the door.

"Glad to see you, Captain. Come right in the dining-room and have a cup of coffee. When did you arrive in New York?"

"Just two days ago. I had a little spare time, so I thought I'd take the stage through the island and make you a call."

After some time in lively con-

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versation, Captain Vogel invited Jennie to take a ride.

"This horse I got at the inn is more noted for safety than speed, I judge," said the Captain as they entered the carriage. "Which way would you like to drive?"

"I would enjoy going for some pond-lilies," Jennie suggested.

They drove along a quiet road, passing now and then a farmhouse, till they came to a pond surrounded by trees, its water dotted with lilies, for the tall, brown stems had put on their bonnets of white and gold and peeped gracefully

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over the water to see themselves.

"We'll drive into the pond a little way and I'll stand on the step of the carriage and get some lilies for you," the Captain remarked as they neared the edge. He deftly urged the horse farther and farther in the water till the animal suddenly plunged into a hollow place above its knees in mud, while the carriage wheels were planted firmly over the hub in mire.

"Mud and misery," ejaculated the vexed man. "I cannot get out and ruin my suit, for who in this

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little town is six feet two; so I could neither beg nor borrow. Zounds! what are we going to do?" he added, jerking the reins vigorously. The horse looked around inquiringly.

"I don't see as we can do anything but wait till somebody comes along that owns one of the row-boats and has the key."

"This is a great predicament!" he continued, impatiently.

Jennie gave vent to her smothered feelings in such merriment, its effect dispelled the Captain's ill-nature.

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"We must be going fast," he remarked, "no one has passed us."

Restored in a measure to good humor he began telling about his last voyage and the places of interest he visited.

"The fact is," he resumed after a little pause—"the fact is," he repeated, "I'm about ready to settle down now. My financial success has been greater than I expected, and I feel as if I should like to have a home of my own. It's my latest ambition to build a handsome home, furnish it in good

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taste and,—and,—who do you think I'd like to place in it?"

"I can't imagine."

"Guess!"

"I never was good at guessing, and this would prove no exception."

"Why it's you, little girl!" he smiled, looking down at her face.

"You surprise me very much, Captain Vogel. I have always regarded you as the son of my father's old-time friend, and I could not do otherwise."

"Don't you think you could learn to love me?" he urged.

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"No; I feel sure. Please say no more about it."

"Perhaps Henry Harvey stands in my way," he muttered. "I never liked that stripling. There's an old grudge between us."

After an embarrassing silence of several minutes that seemed like hours, two men with oars came in sight. The Captain rose, and, swinging his hat, frantically shouted: "Hey! Hallo! Hallo!" The men looked up, taking in the ludicrous situation at once, and quickened their pace toward the unfortunate couple in their water prison.

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"We've made neither headway nor sternway for hours!" called Captain Vogel.

"We'll try to get you under way then," answered one of the men.

"Can you slip mud moorings?"

"Aye, aye, sir!" was the answer.

Each man took a separate boat, untying it from its post, unlocked it and paddled out to the waiting pair. One pulled the horse by the bridle, while the other pushed the wheels, and after considerable effort they got out of their difficulty. The animal looked unspeakable thanks from big grate-

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ful eyes; the Captain slipped a bill in the hand of each benefactor, and Jennie thanked them graciously. Then the carriage turned homeward.

Mr. Mott's invitation to stay to dinner was declined by Captain Vogel, who drove away, chagrined and surprised that money could not buy a girl's affection.

II

AT HOME

“What a pretty home! Everything that heart could wish, and all arranged with artistic carefulness,” exclaimed Miss Huldah Verity, as she sat down in a comfortable chair and glanced round the cosy parlor with an air of satisfaction. The words she expressed generally agreed with her thoughts. Whether they would please or hurt, she never stopped to consider, but rather took pride in frankness of speech.

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"I'm glad you like it, we do," answered Jennie. "I am eager to have you meet my husband. I think he will please you, and your fastidious ideas will find little to criticize. He is refined and dignified, and everything that's nice."

"'Nice' was a comprehensive word with us schoolgirls when we discussed the boys, wasn't it?"

"Yes, indeed. What good times we used to have together. I am delighted to have you visit me; you must stay as long as you possibly can, for Henry enjoys company as much as I do."

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“Do try my piano, Huldah, it's a long time since I heard you play. Steinweh make, you see; I like it best of any.”

Miss Verity ran her fingers over the keys skillfully and struck a few chords, remarking, “I, too, just love the Steinweh tone. What a pile of music! Of course I can look it over. Mostly duets and tenor songs. Your husband sings I infer.”

“Yes, he has a smooth, sympathetic voice of exquisite quality and sings with such nice perception. I guess that's why I mar-

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ried him. Every evening, unless we go out, after the paper is read, we spend the rest of the time singing."

"You seem so happy in your married life, Jennie. It makes me inclined to hasten the date of my wedding day. But who is this coming?"

Going toward the window they saw three men approaching the door with slow movement, and the middle man was supported on each side by the two others.

"Oh, it's my husband!" cried Jennie, running to open the door.

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"What is the matter?" she sobbed excitedly.

"Do not be frightened, madam. Your husband was not able to come home alone, but he will be all right by morning. With your permission we'll assist him to his room."

"Do get the doctor here as quickly as possible," she begged.

When the physician came he assured the anxious wife there was no cause for alarm, saying, as he took his leave, "Just let him sleep, he will come out all right."

All night long the two women

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watched by the bedside of the moaning, raving man as he tossed from one side to the other in delirium.

"I think he is coming down with brain fever, Huldah; I'm afraid the doctor doesn't understand."

"I'm afraid you don't understand, Jennie. Don't you see he is intoxicated?"

"Why, Huldah, I am shocked you should think such a thing and surprised that you dare say it. You do not know my husband!"

"Well, I know what drunkenness is, for I've seen my brother in

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that condition more than once. Drink has robbed him of all that was good and true."

"I am very sorry to learn this of your brother. How little we know the secret heart sorrows of another," lamented the woe-stricken wife. "To think this is the way you should meet my husband! I was so proud of him."

"Since this has happened, Jennie, I think I'd better go away early in the morning, and visit you at some other time. It is better that you two should meet this great sorrow alone together."

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Mr. Harvey came down late to breakfast after Huldah had gone, hastily drank a cup of coffee and hurried off to business.

Jennie was mute with grief. Only a year of happy wedded life, and then this dreadful revelation, just as she needed most the influence of a husband's sustaining strength and sympathy, when she felt most the need of loving tenderness and thoughtful care. Days that followed were full of anxiety to the saddened heart. Later and later he returned at night with unsteady step. All

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through the long and lonely evening hours the sorrowful wife would pace the floor with hands tight clenched, as if to nerve her waning strength for whatever might happen at his coming, while hot tears bathed the fevered cheeks and blinded the waiting eyes as every little while she would go peer out in the darkness of night and look,—and linger,—and listen. When he did come, it was no longer a love-lit smile, affectionate words and gentle caress that gave her greeting, but blood-shot eyes from a bloated face met hers with

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vacant stare, and if he talked at all it was in language vulgar and profane, for the brain was crazed with drink. Then he stayed away for weeks and months, while ever in her thoughts by day and through her dreams at night was the haunting image of her husband, a captive held by strong drink, the combination of a beast and demon. On and on through anxious days and wakeful nights she suffered weary pain, while her mind was full of dread forebodings about her husband, and, too,

lest his influence in some way might affect her unborn child.

When the time of agony came, and brave endurance failed, and life was almost gone, a little helpless, feeble cry brought back the soul to consciousness, and when they laid the fragile, tender form within her arms, nestling soft and warm close to her breast, she kissed its little face, and prayed they both might die.

III

THE PARTING

A week passed while the way-worn life yet lingered, and the spirit seemed hovering between time and eternity.

The rays of the setting sun shone through the western window as the nurse entered the sick room, and in a tone of trained composure roused her patient from lethargy.

“Mrs. Harvey, your husband has just come in; he will sail for the West Indies to-morrow morning, and he wants to speak with you

before he goes. I have told him he must stay only a few minutes. Try to keep calm."

As she left, Mr. Harvey, pale and haggard, entered with soft tread and kneeled by the bedside in silence. His wife opened her eyes and with a sad smile placed the tiny hand of the baby in his. Close to his bowed face he held it, and hers too, with a firm grasp, bathing them with tears of penitence.

"Oh, Jennie! If you could know the sorrow and shame I feel!" he said, falteringly. "I have

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staid away because I knew you should not see me in my drunken condition. I thought I had conquered my desire for drink or I would never have married you. But when I found your money I had urged you to put in my business was gone, and the investment a failure, my nerves were all unstrung, so I took a drink to brace me up. That one glass roused the old desire for stimulant, and I drank, and drank again. My thirst grew more and more and burned me through and through. If you could know how I have

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struggled to stop, I'm sure you would forgive me. Money and manhood are lost. The only thing I can find to do is to sail for the West Indies, so I came to say good-bye. Can you give me one word of love? I feel so weak. I cannot tell how weak. I have no strength of will to break off this dreadful habit. I want to do what's right, Jennie, but, if I fail, remember what was good in me, and do forget the rest."

"God loves the souls of men. He is ready to forgive and help.

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Try once more for the sake of our baby."

She was too feeble to whisper more. He laid his cheek by hers for a moment and their tears were mingled; he kissed her forehead, pressed the baby fingers to his lips, then quietly left the room.

The young mother and little baby were alone.

Slow running weeks passed on to months, and long remaining months went into years; but no message did they bring from him she had trusted with her happiness,

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in all the warmth of young and ardent faith.

It is a bitter disappointment for a woman to discover that the chief relation in life has been a mistake. A man does not feel it so keenly, for love with him is only a part of life; to a woman, it is the whole of it.

What compensation has this world to offer for perished hope! When in grief, the soul bends over buried Honor, and Truth, and Trust; no funeral train of kindly friends, no flowers, no ritual lend tribute of consolation, no chant-

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ing choir with music low and sweet
to break the awful stillness. By
this deep grave in the heart the
mourner sheds sorrowful tears,—
in silence,—alone.

IV

DISAPPEARANCE

Helen, as the baby was called, grew with the weeks more and more companionable to her mother. Her childish prattle all through the day was an untiring diversion, and at night, as the little voice chimed in the lullaby, the touch of baby fingers falling lightly on her face was soothing and restful.

One Sunday when Mrs. Harvey returned from church she found

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Chloe, the maid, in a condition of great excitement.

“Why are you crying so, Chloe? What is the matter?”

“Oh, Missus Harvey, I’s e got mah wirk done, an’ put baby in her li’l carriage on the porch, an’ she et her bread an’ milk as ef she was reel hungry. Then the li’l thing goes fas’ asleep lookin’ lak she wuz an angel. I finds mah sunbonnet an’ goes makin’ tracks for home to git mah new dress mammy dun finish las’ night. I knowed right well I could git back ’fore baby woke up, but I runned

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right smart comin' back, and I went a lookin' all roun' for baby. It cert'ny is cur'us whar baby's gone!"

"Gone!" exclaimed Mrs. Harvey in dismay.

Chloe kept sobbing convulsively in unrestrained excitement.

"My baby gone! Where?"

The startling news soon spread. All the people made search everywhere, that day and continuously, but no clew could be discovered of the missing child.

It was a desolate house, indeed. At the close of tedious, dreary

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days, when she went to her room at night, only to see an unused pillow by hers, and the empty crib, she would take the picture of her little girl and talk to it, saying over and over:

“Oh, my little girl, if only I might know that you are safe in heaven! If I had seen your little form laid in the grave where I should go and strew fresh flowers, I think I could be reconciled. But this terrible suspense, how can I longer endure? My aching heart is lonely,—lonely while it waits.”

V

A FINDING

“What hez he got now, I wonder!” exclaimed old Molly Dooley.

She stood in the narrow door of a little hut, her sun-browned hand shading the squinted eyes as she looked over the sandy beach toward the water. “What hez he got now do you s’pose, Watch; go an’ meet your master.”

The dog gave a quick bark as he started on a run toward a man coming slowly with a big bundle of something in his arms.

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“What hev you got there, Bill?” she called, as she went to meet him.

“What you s’pose, Molly? Jes’ look a-here!”

He laid the bundle down on the beach, untied the corners of a rough sailor blanket, and what did Molly see but a pretty little girl, her flaxen curls straying from a white bonnet, and underneath a pink cape with a pink silk-quilted lining, a white dress, lace-trimmed skirt, dainty shoes and stockings, and all the clothes showing care and refinement.

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“Where on airth did you git her?” she said, examining the fine clothes.

“Why a man cum along and sez he: ‘I’m goin’ to lay this young un’ down here on the sand while I go in the channel and dig a mess o’ clams.’ Sez I, ‘Whar’d she cum frum?’ an’ sez he, ‘Its mammy died aboard ship on the voyage, an’ I’m goin’ to take her to New York an’ put her in some orfun asylum.’ ”

“ ‘She’s a purty lookin’ young un,’ sez I.”

“Well, he went off a clammin’,

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an' 'fore I knowed it that feller was nowhar' to be seen. Ef yew say so, le's keep it, Molly. She mus' be 'bout as ole as our July Ann wuz when she died nigh on tew, sixty year ago, I guess," he mused, drawing his shirt sleeve across his eyes.

"No 'taint, Bill! Not so much as that," corrected his wife, bringing the corner of her blue and white check apron to her face.

"I should 'a' thort that air cap'n could 'a' found out somehow by her mother's things whar the little critter orter be."

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“Well, shel I take her along to the house? She seems to be pretty sound asleep.”

He leaned down and gently took up the child.

“Give ’er tew me, Bill; men folks dunno how to handle yung un’s,” said his wife, taking the child in her arms.

Neither of them spoke as they walked along home. Their thoughts wandered back through the years to their little girl that died.

“Whar’s the little thing a-gwine ter sleep?” asked the old man, as

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they went in the one room of the house.

“Do yer begin now yer everlasting’ worryin’, will ye, Bill Dooley? Guess I ken manage it somehow.”

Bill hung up his slouched hat on a peg by the door, and sat down on a chair minus a back except one spoke; against this he rubbed his back, saying:

“Thar’s a sight o’ them blamed skeeters down by the medder, ’most et me up alive all the arternoon.”

Molly made no reply but sat

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down in the one other chair of the room, which her husband, with masculine gallantry, always left for her to occupy. To be sure the original bottom had disappeared, except two or three rushes that hung down one corner which the little black kitten liked to pull and play with; but the back remained, also one rocker and part of another. A piece of a worn-out coat had been punched under the edge and firmly fastened to the frame of the chair-seat with tow string wound in and out, and a part of the lining from the same old coat

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was made into a cushion stuffed with wild goose feathers she had saved from time to time. As Molly rocked to and fro, holding the child in her arms close to her breast, she unconsciously hummed a snatch of an old-time song she used to sing to her own baby, while the old chair creaked and squeaked an inharmonious accompaniment.

“My, oh my, but she’s pretty though!” she exclaimed, looking at the face of the sleeping child.

“Let me hold her a spell, it’s mos’ supper time, ain’t it?”

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"Yis, yis, I forgot; I wuz a thinkin'."

She got up and laid the child carefully in his arms, then busied herself preparing the evening meal.

"What's she goin' to eat, Molly?"

"I wish to the land you'd stop naggin' of me. Guess I can manage it!" snapped the wife.

"Pork ain't good for leetle folks, is it?" he inquired after a few minutes of silence.

"Well I can jam up a biled

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tater for her and soak bits o' bread in tea, can't I?"

Just then beautiful blue eyes opened and looked around wonderingly; a little form straightened up, and a little voice cried out: "Mamma! Mamma! Where's my mamma?"

"Don't be skairt, baby. Here, take a drink o' water," said the woman soothingly.

"What's she goin' to set on, Molly," inquired the old man, looking around the room with two chairs and a table.

She took the child from his arms

and put it in her cushioned chair, saying, in a coaxing manner:

“You’ll set there a little spell, won’t you? We’re going to hev sumthin’ to eat now, right away.”

The little one understood and was quiet. Then the wife, going over to her husband, laid her hand on his arm and said in a mild tone:

“Bill, hev you forgot that leetle chair July Ann used ter set in? You go git it. You’ll find it in an ole big bag ’way under the attic eaves. I stowed it away ’cause I felt as if I couldn’t see it ’round.

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You go fetch it down now, Bill."

The old man rose slowly and stood by his wife a minute;—his arm found its way around her,—he drew her head to his shoulder, and then kissed her cheek.

"You hain't kissed me afore, Bill, sence July Ann laid in her coffin!"

The practical side of her nature so long dominant soon asserted itself and she said again:

"You go fetch it down now, Bill! Supper's all gettin' cold I s'pose."

As he mounted the ladder to the loft his wife stood watching him and added: "It's 'way in the nor'-west corner, an' look out not to bump your head agin the rafters, it might stun ye!"

He brought the little chair down and together they untied the string and took it from its long resting place in the old bag, with a reverent touch.

Then Molly put the little girl in the chair and drew it to the table.

"What's she gwine to eat off of, Molly?"

"You'll find it wrapped up in

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brown paper in the cupboard on the top shelf."

"I can't feel it," he said, fumbling around according to directions.

"It's in the left-hand corner. Men can't never find nothin'."

He brought it to light and watched her undo it from its wrappings. She put the little old tin plate, with the letters of the alphabet round the edge, in front of the little girl.

"There now, what do you think o' that?"

The child took it in her little

hands and passed it toward the plate of steaming potatoes.

"Yis, you shell hev some an' all you want, too," said Molly, fixing for her a generous supply.

"This 'ere pork's done to a T," declared Bill, taking another slice from the platter.

The unlooked-for compliment brought a blush of surprise and gratitude to her old wrinkled face.

"Well, I orter know how to fry pork by this time. I've been at it long enough."

Billy trotted the little one on his

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knee while his wife cleared the table and washed the dishes.

"Whar's she gwine to sleep, Molly?" asked the husband, as she covered the coals in the fire-place and took the pine knot to go to bed.

"Yew du beat all, Bill, to wurry 'bout things. She can sleep with us a while till I can fix up sumthin', can't she?"

"I s'pose so, Molly."

"Guess I ken manage it somehow, Bill."

Many times in the days that fol-

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lowed the little child asked:

“Where’s my mamma?”

“Your mamma can’t come,” was always the answer.

“Why?” urged the child, and every time the reply was:

“ ’Cause.”

VI

TIMELY WORDS

Some men have the faculty of gaining the confidence of women. Beneath apparent coldness and a degree of reserve, gentle courtesies reveal a tender nature. They possess an inborn charm of graciousness that pervades every word and action. Their purity of thought and life makes them capable of running far in a friendship without falling into any of the wonderful mixtures of semblance, all alike called love. Also their self-con-

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tained manner and high sense of propriety prevent any girl of precipitous temperament or woman of ardent nature from a similar catastrophe.

Such a man was pastor of the church in a little Long Island village. He knew the place by heart, and all the people, too. He went among them year in and year out, provoking no unfavorable criticism. On the contrary, he enjoyed the good will of everybody, won by his tact and discretion.

In this village Mrs. Harvey came to live. Her physician per-

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emptorily ordered a change. She was in too prostrate a condition to travel, so with Chloe she lived in quiet and isolation. She went nowhere and would see nobody. Her heart was dead; was dead, though life went on and on.

One day in the early fall Chloe brought a letter from the post-office. This is what it said:

DEAR JENNIE:

I am coming to see you, for old times' sake, and I am going to stay a while, too, because I know you need me whether you want me or not. You see I am very diplo-

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matic and write just as I am leaving town so you have no chance to send me word not to come. Expect me Saturday afternoon.

With all the affection of your early schoolmate.

HULDAH.

When she came, and met her old friend, the first impulse was to exclaim, "Why, Jennie, I never should have known you!" But for once she took care to refrain from her usual out-spoken way, and sustained the conversation till bedtime with no apparent notice of the brief replies.

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The next morning, as they finished a late breakfast, Huldah said: "Well we have just about time enough to get ready for church."

"I don't go to church any more, Huldah; I don't go anywhere."

"Why, Jennie, don't go to church! Well, of course you will be polite enough to go with me. Come on, it's time we started."

Without another word of dissent, Mrs. Harvey went up to her room and very soon afterward stood waiting in the hall for her friend.

Although Jennie's was much the stronger character of the two, yet Huldah from childhood seemed to understand how to manage her.

The atmosphere of a church is as discernible as that in a home, and right away they both felt welcome. Everybody seemed happy. The music was hearty and inspiring, the prayers earnest and uplifting. The sermon was about living for others. Among other things the minister said:

“It is not a matter of argument that we should find something to do for God, but of pure and simple

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duty. It is a great privilege to be permitted to take a part in the grand enterprise of making this world better. Will you not be a co-worker with God to save souls? Give what you have of time, talent or money, but give something. You will have to be judged, as to your work, by yourself, when you die.

“Some are striving to be strong though thronging cares press heavily upon them; these need help in kindly deeds.

“Some are trying to be faithful in the midst of bitter disappoint-

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ment; can you not speak a friendly word that may comfort them?

“To some, their plans of life are altered, and hope lies dead, and the bereft heart is paralyzed. Yet there is something left; daily toil, something of health, a few friends, and life,—life is left.

“From that which is gone let us turn from it, though with a ceaseless, undying sorrow, let us with steady purpose look bravely for what is left for us to do, and unfalteringly try to do it. Life,—life is left, let us try to make the best of it.”

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Mrs. Harvey said as they went home: "Huldah, that sermon was just what I needed to hear. I think I can never get away from those words. They were timely words to me."

VII

DISCLOSURES

“Mah missus sez she reckon mebbe yo’s lak some des yere peaches, an’ she sed to tell you to do ’em up or they’ll git right squashy, ’cept the bestest un’s ’ll keep a spell for eatin’. Yas’m, Aunt Jemina, them peaches grow’d on li’l tree by the well. No’m! Nothin’ heerd f’um Massa Harvey goin’ on ’lebben ye-ers. Cert’ny is cur’us. He mus’ be drowneded dead. Say, Aunt Je-

68 HELEN'S CHOICE

mina, yo' knows Mistah Phillipse, the preach-ah, don' yo'? He gits roun' to our house right offen. I reckon he shorely cortin' mah missus. Las' night uz I wuz car-rin' a passel of dishes inter the dinin'-room, I jes' peeked inter the parlor an' I see the preachah a talkin' to mah missus re-el earne's'. He cert'ny looked lak he meant it, an' mah missus wuz kind o' smilin' an' a cryin' all togedder. Nebber did see missus luk jes' dat way in all mah bawn days. I dassent stay to look no mo', and I jes' sneaked out the back door, an' when I'se

HELEN'S CHOICE 69

peekin' roun' one corner of the po'ch I shorley see the preachah put a ring on missus' forefinger. I guess they're gwine to be mahr'ed shore. This lovin' is cert'ny cur'us. Folks tak's notions jes' right away sometimes an' don' git over it. Now mah Sambo sez he lak me mo' better'n any gal the berry fus' tim' he see me. I tole him 'twas jes' nigger nonsense. Then he look lak he don' want me for to argify wif him, so I didn't say no mo'. I reckon the preachah an' missus gwine to be mahr'ed, shore's yo' bawn. I 'clar' to good-

70 HELEN'S CHOICE

ness, hope I ain't tole nothin' I hedn't orter. I mus' be gwine. Good mornin'."

This was told without interruption, except as Chloe took breath. Aunt Jemina exclaimed: "You don't say so!"

Mrs. Harvey was surprised the next day while walking down the street, that old Mrs. Brown (who lived next house to Aunt Jemina) should look at her with a quizzical smile that seemed to say, "I know it!" Later she met Mrs. Hewlitt (next neighbor to Mrs. Brown), and a peculiar twinkle came in her

HELEN'S CHOICE 71

eye as they spoke together that seemed to say, "I know it."

Afterward, an old man living next to Mrs. Hewlitt came along; he gave her hand a firmer grasp than usual, saying, "God bless you!" while his eyes added, "I know it."

VIII

THE RETURN

“Hallo, Lawyer Denton! How are you?”

“Good evening, sir. Your face looks a little familiar, but you’ve got the best of me, for I can’t call you by name.”

The first speaker had just stepped out of the stage coach, and, entering the parlor of the country inn, saw no one he knew among those waiting there except the person he addressed.

“So you don’t know me! Have

HELEN'S CHOICE 73

you forgotten Henry Harvey, your seatmate in the district school?"

"Why is this you, old fellow? I'll see if the stage brought me any letter, and then I'm going home and you come with me and we'll talk over old times."

"Thank you, thank you, but I'm trying to find my wife. I learned she sold her city home and was living somewhere on the south side of Long Island."

"Yes, she lives about five miles from here; it is so dark, and rough traveling, no one would drive

74 HELEN'S CHOICE

there to-night. Take the advice of a friend and wait till morning. I live only a little way from here, come home with me."

As they walked along to the house, Mr. Harvey said: "I suppose the baby is grown so I wouldn't know her."

The lawyer was glad it was dark so his face would reveal no secrets as he answered: "Well, you know, years change us all."

At supper, and afterward, he kept the conversation drifting back to childhood days, and felt greatly

HELEN'S CHOICE 75

relieved when his guest retired to his room.

“What a man doesn't know about cannot trouble him,” said Lawyer Denton when he was alone with his wife. After a night's sleep and breakfast he can better stand the revelations I shall have to make.”

“I am thinking of his wife; she is so happy now,” meditated Mrs. Denton.

“Well, everybody thought he must be dead.”

“But how is this affair going to turn out?”

76 HELEN'S CHOICE

"We'll see," was the indefinite reply.

The next morning, after breakfast, the two men seated themselves on each side of the big blazing fire in the fire-place where a huge hickory log gave out a genial warmth that bleak December day.

"I suppose I might as well tell you first as last, Harvey, that your wife is married again, and very happily married, too."

"Married again!" echoed the guest in dismay.

"And the baby?" gasped the

HELEN'S CHOICE 77

man. "What about my daughter?"

"The baby must have been stolen, we think. Your wife was at church and the servant left the child asleep on the porch to run to her home to get a dress, knowing she would get back before the baby would waken. When she returned the child was gone. And no one has since been able to find any clew to the mystery, although everything has been done that could be done."

"And that is all you know about the baby!"

78 HELEN'S CHOICE

"Yes, it is all anybody knows."

The disappointed man was speechless.

"I think the best thing is for me to drive over alone, and you wait here," the lawyer suggested.

"She is my wife and I want to see her," replied Mr. Harvey in persistent tone.

"But what if she does not want to see you? You don't seem to realize how much anxiety and unhappiness you have caused her. Not one word from you in so many years. It doesn't seem to occur to

HELEN'S CHOICE 79

you that her feelings may have changed toward you."

"Well, you see, lawyer, I got taken prisoner on board a pirate vessel, and,—and,—"

"Look, the carriage is waiting. I will hurry back, you stay here."

Reluctantly Mr. Harvey consented to abide by Lawyer Denton's decision.

On arriving at the parsonage, after salutations, preliminary remarks, and inquiries about Mr. Phillipse, who was away at a church convention, Lawyer Denton said:

80 HELEN'S CHOICE

"Mrs. Phillipse, you remember Mr. Harvey and I were early schoolmates."

"Yes, Mr. Denton."

"May I ask if in all these years you never received any message or letter from him, or heard any rumor concerning his whereabouts?"

"No, Mr. Denton. Did you ever get any letter from him?"

"No, Mrs. Phillipse. If he should ever show up, would you want to see him?"

"No, indeed," she answered, firmly. "I endured so much with

HELEN'S CHOICE 81

Mr. Harvey after he took to drink, things that I could not tell, I could not speak of what I have been through, and it is best I should not think of it. The youthful affection I had for him was so wounded as to kill the very root of it, and only pity remains. No miracle could replace the old feeling of trustfulness. If I could know he is alive I should not want to see him."

"Pardon, Mrs. Phillipse, my seeming inquisitiveness, but you know the conversation drifted along. I am in something of a

82 HELEN'S CHOICE

hurry, so I will bid you good morning."

When he returned to Mr. Harvey and told him what was said, the waiting man, without a word, rose, put on his coat and went toward the door.

"Harvey, my friend, I'm sorry for you," said the lawyer, shaking hands with him as they reached the piazza.

Mr. Harvey put on his hat and, without speaking, bowed and went away.

IX

FOUND

Several years passed, and again the school friends of other days were together.

“Jennie, you said you could think of nothing that would especially please Aunt Jemina for a Christmas present. About eight miles from here a young married woman named Mrs. Smith makes very pretty rag-rugs to sell, the colors are blended so well in the braiding.”

84 HELEN'S CHOICE

"I am glad you spoke of it, Huldah, we will drive over there this very afternoon."

"This is the house, I think, Jennie," said Huldah, as they drove along.

"How neat and well kept everything looks," observed Jennie.

"And you'll find Mrs. Smith a woman of charming appearance," expressed her friend.

"We have come to select a braided rug for a Christmas present to an old lady," stated Huldah. "Have you still that one with scarlet and lavender center and black

border that you showed me the other day?"

"Yes, and I will show you two or three others I've made since," replied Mrs. Smith. She returned from another room and, spreading the mats on the floor, said: "These are all I have on hand now."

"Which do you think Aunt Jermina would like best?" inquired Huldah, looking up at her friend.

But Jennie's eyes were fastened upon the young woman, and the mats were unnoticed.

"Pardon me, Mrs. Smith, may I

86 HELEN'S CHOICE

inquire what your name was before you were married?"

"Dooley," replied the woman, somewhat surprised.

"And might I ask your first name?" continued Mrs. Phillipse.

"July Ann," answered the woman.

"Your face reminds me of a little baby I lost. Your eyes look just like hers."

"Did she die?" asked Mrs. Smith.

Then the story of the lost baby was told her in broken voice.

HELEN'S CHOICE 87

"Tell me something of your life, please," she added.

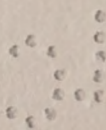
"I grew up with daddy and mammy, the cat and the dog in a little house just in the edge of the woods," Mrs. Smith related; "but a vision of a different home and a beautiful mamma I could never get out of my mind. After they died I went to live with a woman in the nearest village, and she taught me how to read, and other things. My husband worked for the same family, and after two years we were married. Just before mammy died she told me I

88 HELEN'S CHOICE

was not her own child and sent me up in the attic for a bundle stowed away. She said in it were the clothes I had on when some captain left me on the beach and daddy brought me to her."

At mention of the captain, the remark made long years ago flashed across the mind of Mrs. Phillipse. "Perhaps Henry Harvey stands in my way. I never liked that stripling, there's an old grudge between us."

The state of excitement into which Mrs. Phillipse was thrown was pitiful when Mrs. Smith came



HELEN'S CHOICE 89

down stairs with the bundle, opened it, and spread it out on the table. At a glance the mother recognized the pink cape, little white bonnet, and clothes her baby had on when she kissed her good-bye as she lay in her little carriage that never-to-be-forgotten Sunday morning.

“Oh, my precious child, my long-lost baby!” she cried, folding the girlish form in her arms. Then she fell unconscious to the floor.

“Where am I?” she said later, opening her eyes on the new sur-

90 HELEN'S CHOICE

roundings, as she lay on the lounge. "What has happened?"

"I am your child, mother," answered Mrs. Smith, kneeling by her. "I am your lost baby. See the little pink shoes and stockings, the little dress and clothes you made me, and the pretty pink cloak; see, mother, oh, I am so glad to know you are my mother!"

"Let me look in your eyes again. Oh, yes! You are my baby, my darling baby. Hold me close, close; let me feel the touch of your fingers on my forehead. Oh, my child, my child, speak to

HELEN'S CHOICE 91

me! Tell me it is not a dream. Let me look in your blue eyes again! Yes, I know, I feel sure you are my child, my very own, my darling blue-eyed baby. Thank God! Thank God!"

When Mr. Smith came home at night he and Huldah decided Mrs. Phillipse must remain a day or two. So he sent a man and a message to Mr. Phillipse. The next evening the happy mother was able to talk with Mr. Smith.

"Will you not give me my daughter," she pleaded, "for a time to have all, all to myself?"

92 HELEN'S CHOICE

She is so young to be a wife. Let me send her to school for two years, let her learn something of music and painting. You be her lover and after two years bring her to your home more accomplished, and you would be proud to claim your wife."

"I am proud of her now. We might grow apart to do as you suggest. She is my wife and I want her with me."

"Then both of you come. Come together," entreated the mother.

"It would be too far from my

HELEN'S CHOICE 93

business. You come here often, often as you like, and I will help you to give her advantages. You find a governess and music teacher, and I will see that good help in the house is provided so she may have time for self-improvement. My business is growing and I can afford it. 'July Ann' shall become 'Helen' again, and I will be your son, if I may."

He was a manly fellow, "self-made" we say, and Mrs. Phillipse felt, after all, that his judgment in the matter was best. And, as the months rolled by, the little self-

94 HELEN'S CHOICE

improvement society of two, under Mrs. Phillipse's direction, developed quite as much as she expected, and more.

X

A GLAD CHRISTMAS

“Good mornin’, Aunt Jemina! Mah missus reckon mebbe yo’s lak dis yere mat fur yo’s front room an’ she wish yo’s a merry Christmas. Yas’m, plenty ’nough room, shore! Big tuk-key! Yas’m, they all comes yis’erday. Massa Smith an’ Missus Helen and li’l Helen. Dinner’ll be set up at one o’clock. Missus sez yo’s mus’ shorely come over. Missus jes’ totes that li’l Helen ’roun’ ev’rywhar’ she goes. ’Peers lak mah missus wuz nebber

96 HELEN'S CHOICE

so happy in all her bawn days. The folks is all fixed up in their bestest clothes an' missus got on a right new dress, an' li'l Helen got on the berry dress her mother wuz stole away in. My laws, they's all right glad, yas'm, all happy dis yere Christmas in that thar house, an' they seems to think li'l Helen's 'bout right. I 'clar to goodness, time that tuk-key was a rostin'. Egypt lan', I mus' be makin' tracks for home. Yo' come 'long shore bime-by. Yas'm, an' I wish yo's a merry Christmas. Good mornin'!"

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